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Healthy in Mind, Body, and Spirit

by Milton Becknell, Ph.D.

The stress of modern life can manifest itself in our physical, mental, and spiritual health. Rest is crucial for optimal health across all dimensions.

Gary has been working 10-hour days in a demanding job. His busy schedule doesn't allow much time for exercise, and he's relied on caffeine to maintain his productivity at work. Although he has sensed an overall energy decline the last few years and has found it increasingly difficult to get a good night's sleep, he didn't think it was anything serious. Chronic cold symptoms finally prompted him to see his doctor, who discovered Gary's blood pressure, heart rate, and cholesterol were significantly elevated. He had gained 25 pounds and was showing early signs of type 2 diabetes. Gary's doctor warned

him that if he didn't promptly change his lifestyle, heart disease could shorten his life.

We live in a world that is moving at a pace far beyond what our ancestors could have imagined, and we are finding that the price of success and prosperity can be hazardous to our health. According to a 2010 American Psychological Association survey, 44 percent of Americans reported that their stress levels had increased over the past five years, especially in the areas of money, work, and the economy.

British economist E.F. Schumacher noted that the modern world is "tumbling from crisis

to crisis.” The pace has become so demanding and frenzied that physician Richard Swenson noted that people simply “don’t have time to heal.” Indeed, the proportion of stress-related disorders has increased exponentially with modernization in the 21st century, including heart attack, hypertension, diabetes, obesity, sleep disorders, chronic back pain, migraine/tension headache, as well as depressive and anxiety disorders, to name a few.

Mind-Body Connection

To buffer the potentially destructive effects of the velocity of modern life, it is necessary to address the mind, body, and spirit in an integrated fashion. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato (427–347 B.C.) advocated a holistic view of man where mind and body are connected. He wrote, “As you ought not to attempt to cure the head without the body, then neither ought you to attempt to cure the body without the soul ... for the part will never be well unless the whole is well.”

This view gave way to a mind-body split in the 17th century. Scientific advances in anatomy and the cardiovascular system introduced the idea that mechanisms of the body could be studied and understood apart from the mind (or soul). Rene Descartes (1596–1650), often called the father of modern philosophy, is credited with popularizing mind-body dualism. Many of his ideas have since been proven inaccurate, but “Cartesian Dualism” dominated the practice of medicine for the next 400 years.

Fortunately, the last 50 years have brought a gradual shift back to a more holistic, integrative approach to health. Perhaps the best example of how modern science is embracing the mind-body connection is in the area of chronic pain. Descartes’ simplistic, reductionist theory was overturned in 1965 when Ron Melzack and Patrick Wall demonstrated that pain can occur without a clear stimulus, evidenced by phantom limb pain experienced by many amputees. As Melzack famously said, “You don’t need a

body to feel pain.” If physical pain results from a dialogue of sorts between the mind and body, effective prevention and treatment must include both mind and body interventions.

Consequences of Our Choices

Psalms 139 says we are “fearfully and wonderfully made,” but our unhealthy lifestyle choices can leave us vulnerable to a host of physical and mental problems. James Bray, former president of the American Psychological Association, has said, “Genetics loads the gun, and environment pulls the trigger.” While we cannot control our genetic endowment, we have considerable control over the environments to which we expose ourselves and the lifestyle habits we practice.

Habits are by definition repetitive and automatic, and they can be either health enhancing or health compromising. Unhealthy habits, such as lack of exercise or not getting enough sleep, take a toll on our bodies as well as our minds. We are especially vulnerable when we do not sense immediate consequences — we then wrongly perceive that our choices have no bearing on health outcomes. At that point we may perpetuate unhealthy habits, like overeating or consuming too much caffeine, as a way to cope with the stress, anxiety, and depression that often follow.

Rest for the Mind

Psychologist Kenneth Pelletier wrote in his classic 1977 work *Mind As Healer, Mind As Slayer* that those who manage their lives well consistently practice two distinct behaviors: choosing optimism and accepting responsibility for their actions. Optimism is more complex than merely thinking “happy thoughts.” This is better understood as *realistic* thinking, which involves an accurate assessment of reality and choosing to view a life event from an upbeat perspective. When we choose optimism, we are submitting to God’s authority in our lives, and this has a soothing, healing effect on our bodies and

minds. We are, in effect, acknowledging that He, in His sovereignty, is orchestrating events, and my responsibility is to have a submissive, grateful spirit (1 Thess. 5:18).

Even if one's reality is difficult, it is possible to train the mind to recognize truth in life without becoming preoccupied with it. Learning to accept an unpleasant aspect of one's reality is healthier than obsessing about it and becoming captive to its power. Paul demonstrated this well in Romans 7, where he acknowledged his own depravity but ended the chapter with resounding optimism as he noted our redemption in Christ.



This is an aspect of what it means to quiet the mind and find rest from the clamor of scripts the mind is constantly rehearsing — like the 36 things you should be doing right now and the 12 places you need to be. Proverbs 23:7 reminds us that our thoughts are very important, but we are, of course, more than just our thoughts. Our thoughts can range from the ridiculous to the sublime, but if our thoughts are anxious and unfocused, we are apt to be anxious and unfocused. Philippians 4:6–8 urges us to dwell or think on “excellent things.”

Rest for the Body

Likewise we are to be good stewards of our bodies. In Romans 12:1 Paul exhorts us to “present our bodies ... holy and acceptable.”

This has particular relevance in modern society where 65 percent of the population is overweight and 30 percent is obese. This is clearly not acceptable and is literally propelling us toward an epidemic of obesity-related problems such as heart disease, stroke, sleep apnea, type 2 diabetes, and in many cases premature death. Similarly, the number of people suffering from depressive and anxiety disorders continues to escalate, robbing people of their quality of life.

Many of these physical and emotional conditions could be significantly reduced if we would simply learn how to relax. Our autonomic nervous system is designed to cue our bodies for two distinct responses. The sympathetic nervous system, which triggers the “fight or flight” emergency response, invokes a cascade of physiological processes that prepare us to deal with a threat, real or imagined. Instantly, the heart begins beating faster, blood pressure increases, muscle tension escalates, and breathing becomes more rapid and shallow. In short, the body is on heightened alert.

However, what took seconds to launch can take hours to recover from. Our modern culture urges us to respond to everything quickly, as if each new stimulus is a major crisis. When sustained, this wreaks havoc on our bodies and ultimately can lead to heart disease, gastrointestinal issues, weakened immune systems, and premature aging/death.

Conversely, the parasympathetic nervous system restores the body and facilitates recovery. This system promotes healing so we can do battle another day. The body was not created to live in a sustained crisis mode, and when we do, sooner or later breakdown becomes imminent. It is good stewardship to train the mind and body to distinguish between an actual crisis and a pseudo-crisis. Psalm 46:10 admonishes us to “cease [unproductive] striving” and learn to “be still.” Take time to rest and be quiet. This is a learned skill, and it is essential for physical healing and recovery.

Rest for the Soul

The ancient Greeks connected the mind and the body, but the prophet Jeremiah wrote about a third dimension. "This is what the Lord says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls'" (Jer. 6:16).

Just like the mind and body need quiet and rest to recover, so does the soul. Isaiah 30:15 points us to the source of soulful rest: "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength." It is interesting to note that both verses were directed to God's people, and both verses tell us that the people refused the rest that He offered: "But you would have none of it" (Isa. 30:15).

Choosing quiet over chaos, rest over rat race, is fundamentally a spiritual discipline. Psalm 1 directs us to seek godly counsel and immerse ourselves in God's Word. In doing so, we will be "like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither" (Ps. 1:3).

Galatians 6:7 reminds us that God is not mocked; we will reap what we sow. From a psychological perspective, the encouraging news is that anything that can be learned can potentially be unlearned and modified. Our ways of thinking, doing, and being in the world do not have to be "conformed to the pattern of this world" (Rom. 12:2) but rather transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Pursuing mental, physical, and spiritual rest is not only critical to our health but an act of submission to the Creator who made us, loves us, and knows exactly what we need. **T**

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